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PROSPECTS FOR LEBANON

The Current Situation

Fighting between the militia of the right-wing Phalanges Party and radical fedayeen has diminished significantly since the announcement of a cease-fire and the appointment of the military cabinet on May 23. For the moment, both sides are restrained; the Phalangists because they support the new government, the fedayeen and Lebanese leftists because they were caught off guard by its appointment and are considering their next move.

The new government has drawn initial strength from the surprise that surrounded its installation, from its law and order image, and from widespread popular uncertainty about what it will be like to be governed by a military cabinet. At the same time, however, it faces extremely difficult problems: religious and political tensions are at the highest level in the country's history; and opposition forces are united as seldom before.

The policies and tactics adopted by the new government could and probably will be the deciding factor in whether Lebanon's traditional governing system survives the present crisis. The best hope is that it will take a non-partisan, conciliatory approach that through negotiations could restore a modicum of public order and leave Lebanon much as before. At worst, it will move with force against the fedayeen and the leftists, precipitating civil war, destroying the system of political and religious compromises on which the government rests, and inviting intervention by Syria or Israel or both. Such developments, at a minimum, would seriously complicate general Middle East peace negotiations. In the extreme, they could prompt general hostilities that would involve Syria, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt.

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Strategy of the New Government

For the moment, at least, the new government has opted for a conciliatory approach. Deputy Prime Minister Moussa Kanaan has stressed that the government is

"provisional rather than military in a direct sense," that its sole objective is to restore "natural conditions" in the country, and that it will respect past agreements between the government and the fedayeen. The cabinet has so far avoided instituting censorship, curfews, or any of the other trappings of military rule.

Prime Minister Nur ad-Din Rifai will attempt to take advantage of the currently difficult political position of Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasir Arafat, the Phalangists' sense of victory, and the political independence of the leader of Lebanon's Shia Muslim community, Imam Musa Sadr, to divide the opposition and gain grudging acceptance of his government and extended observance of the cease-fire. If this strategy succeeds, it will win a short-term improvement in the security situation and--again in the short term-- justify President Franjiyah's considerable political gamble in appointing a predominantly military government.

Even if Rifai is able to implement the cease-fire, however, he is certain to face what will probably turn out to be overwhelming political challenges. In a display of unity, important Muslim politicians, Lebanese leftist leaders, fedayeen spokesmen, the Syrian press, and one dissident Christian political leader have joined in condemning the new government. They have charged that it threatens the country's majority Muslim population, the Palestinians, Lebanon's National Covenant, and Syria itself. If these opposition forces remain united, they have a good chance of succeeding in their announced goal: to force Rifai to resign.

Radical Arab governments, notably Iraq and Libya, are sure to increase their financial and military support to Lebanese leftists and fedayeen radicals willing to challenge Rifai. These governments already expend large sums for subversive activities in Lebanon, and their agents have played a major role in escalating urban violence over the past few months. The principal Arab states join with the Lebanese government in decrying this meddling in Lebanon's domestic affairs, but are powerless to stop it.

Implications of Further Fighting

If the new government--prompted by its own convictions or by provocations from foreign-supported radicals or the fedayeen--determines that it must use force to put down the civil unrest, it will risk an all-out confrontation with the fedayeen. In the recent past, when there has been a civilian cabinet, leaders of the major fedayeen groups have resisted pressure from their followers to become directly involved in the violence. Now, when the government is itself widely perceived to have changed the rules of the game, even the relatively moderate fedayeen leaders would probably find it impossible to stay out of renewed fighting.

If heavy fighting broke out between the fedayeen and the Lebanese army, it could quickly escalate to engulf and destroy much of Beirut. In the past, successive civilian governments have considered this an unacceptable risk, and have elected to avoid a showdown. This has led to gradually increased freedom of movement for the fedayeen in Lebanon. Now, when the new military government may be prepared to take greater risks, the fedayeen are more heavily armed than in the past. Although they do not have the capability to defeat the combined forces of the Christian militias and the Lebanese army, they do have the capability to sustain urban warfare for some time.

There is some anti-American feeling in Lebanon, but it is not likely that extended urban violence would assume a strongly anti-American character. Several dozen American companies have offices in Beirut, and some 6,000 Americans are resident in the country..

Potential for Syrian Intervention

If the Lebanese army were to come near success in defeating the fedayeen or driving them from Lebanon, as happened in Jordan in 1970 and 1971, Syria would almost certainly intervene on the behalf of the Palestinians. Damascus genuinely supports the Palestinian cause, and, equally important, does not want to aggravate its own problem in dealing with Palestinian refugees and the fedayeen by having those now in Lebanon flee to Syria.

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Syrian intervention would be likely to take the form, first, of stronger political threats against Franjiyah and the government of Lebanon. Lebanese leaders are mindful that Lebanon and Syria were historically joined, and that Syria has overwhelmingly superior military capabilities. As a result, the Lebanese are sensitive to Damascus' views on internal Lebanese political matters.

If Syria needed to do more than threaten, it could allow or encourage larger numbers of fedayeen forces and arms to cross from Syria into Lebanon (as happened during the May 1973 clashes between the fedayeen and the army), send units of the Syrian-controlled Palestine Liberation Army into Lebanon, or, finally, send Syrian regular army forces across the border. The current discussions between the Syrians and the Palestinians on closer political and military cooperation will be interpreted by the Lebanese as a potential threat to them.

Damascus is now preoccupied with a host of internal and foreign problems, and would undoubtedly prefer not to allow events in Lebanon to deteriorate to the point that Syrian intervention became necessary. Damascus may, therefore, insist that the fedayeen exercise restraint. Fedayeen leaders would honor such a request, as they are heavily dependent on Syrian political and military support. The majority of the Palestinians realize that cooperation with Syria is their last hope of winning a role in Middle East peace negotiations, or ultimately, of winning control of any of the occupied territories.

In the extreme event that Syria did intervene militarily in Lebanon, the most likely immediate development would be the resignation of the current government and its replacement with a civilian government headed by a Sunni Muslim acceptable to Syria. This probably would be sufficient to prompt a Syrian withdrawal, but it would leave a virtually powerless Lebanese government and would substantially increase the freedom and influence of the fedayeen in Lebanon. Above all, it would greatly diminish the ability of an already-weakened army and the security services to keep order.

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Threats to the Traditional Governing System

It is possible at any stage that civil unrest, with or without Syrian intervention, could grow to the point that either Christian or--more likely--Muslim political groups would withdraw their support for the power-sharing principles of the National Covenant and seek complete power for themselves. The leaders of Lebanon's large Sunni Muslim community have in the past felt that their own interests were best served by supporting the National Covenant. They are now faced with the momentous decision of whether to stick with the known but limited advantages of the present system or overturn the system in the uncertain hope of winning unlimited advantage. Although they have criticized the current military government as fundamentally unacceptable and itself a challenge to the Covenant, it is by no means clear that they are prepared to risk everything to challenge it.

If the current system of government were overturned, however, the most likely regime to emerge would be a leftist, Muslim-dominated government more sympathetic to the Palestinians and the radical Arab states. A leftist government could be dominated by such divergent figures as former prime minister Rashid Karami, socialist leader Kamal Jumblatt, or Shia Muslim Imam Musa Sadr. All would be generally acceptable to the country's several leftist and Muslim political parties, the fedayeen, and Syria. Such a government would be likely to adopt a foreign policy ostensibly less pro-West and pro-US than has been traditional in Lebanon.

Impact on Israel and Peace Negotiations

The rise to power in Lebanon of a radical government sympathetic to Syria would be seen in Tel Aviv as a major threat to Israel's security. Such a regime would not, at least initially, be militarily powerful, but it would leave Israel completely surrounded by hostile Arab states, and would permit an increase in the number of fedayeen cross-border terrorist operations. It could, in time, build its military forces and provide important support to Syria.

At the very least, the existence of a leftist government in Lebanon would heighten the Israelis' sense of defensiveness and increase their reluctance to make territorial concessions to the Arabs. If that government allowed its territory to be used for a significant increase in terrorist operations, it could prompt Israel to be more inflexible toward a peace settlement, and would invite a heavy Israeli military response that could threaten renewed general hostilities.

As an intermediate step, the Israelis could respond to Syrian intervention in Lebanon or to the creation of a radical government in Beirut by occupying a portion of southern Lebanon. Although both Lebanon and Israel have in recent years seemed to regard their border as beyond reasonable dispute, hardliners in Israel have for years pointed out that Israel, by seizing territory up to the Litani River, would gain a more defensible border and a greater supply of water. Occupation of that territory, however, would be a mixed blessing: it would tempt the Syrians to respond by occupying the rest of Lebanon or attacking Israel, and it would alienate the US, which has long defended the territorial integrity of Lebanon.

In all likelihood, Israel would not seize part of Lebanon unless it were prepared for other reasons to renew hostilities with Syria. At present, that does not seem to be the case, and Tel Aviv therefore would be most likely to wait and see what the policies a new Lebanese government followed.